

Alternatives

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Keep the One and Only City Clean!

From the *Alternatives* Desk

BAKANGLADESH is practically a country of one and half cities, some towns and numerous villages. In fact, Dhaka is the only fully urbanized city, while Chittagong is still a semi-urban city. The rest of the places we call cities are actually 'towns' and 'mofussils,' that is, the latter are little less rural than villages. Now, how is it that we are unable to keep only one city clean? There could be several reasons for this. I will limit myself to three.

The first one is very much rooted in our history or should we say that it is rooted in the long lost socially constructed division of labour. Our forefathers, possibly to develop a kind of professionalism in every sphere of life, if not to provide more leisure to those who needed the least, divided people according to various professions. It soon (as it was bound to be so) degenerated into a rigidly imposed hierarchy, where those who leisured the most were put at the top, while those who made leisure possible were put at the bottom. In the latter category belonged the so-called 'cleaners community,' more popularly known as the maythors and maythorons.

Dhaka practically was kept clean (garbage, latrine, streets) by these maythors and maythorons. Three things contributed to their (post-independence) departure. One, a steep rise in the level of poverty, particularly hard core poverty, which forced many of those traditionally outside the fold of the 'cleaners community' to take up the job of cleaning. This only resulted in elbowing out the maythors and maythorons from the said profession. Two, given the level of poverty and lack of a decent job in the city, public cleaning became a somewhat lucrative government job, with more emphasis on the things of the government than on the job itself. In the backdrop of the pressure for such jobs and the social composition of the people, few maythors and maythorons could hold their position. And this brings us to the last point. The post-independence rise of (Muslim) majoritarianism also saw an increased alienation in the lives and livings of the non-Muslim minorities, including that of maythors and maythorons, in Bangladesh. Many of the members of the 'cleaners community' simply left for India. As a result of all this, the task of cleaning fell on the less professional, if not on the least trained, deprofessionalized, inefficient job seekers. Public cleaning has otherwise structurally succumbed to a state of inefficiency.

Secondly, as a community of people we are possibly the least trained when it comes to public cleaning. This is somewhat of an irony for so much time is given to personal cleanliness, particularly those who are Muslims and pray five times a day. I see here almost a rupture between the public and the personal, with the latter uniquely disinterested on the things of the public. To cite one example. It is not uncommon to see a person spitting on the corridor of an office or a public place, totally unmindful of the fact that a passerby could step on it. The said person, however, will desist from doing such a thing at home. The case with garbage disposal is no different either. Although we are eager to keep garbage outside our home, we take little interest once it is placed in the streets and away from our home. Little thought is given to the fact that for someone else, a passerby for that matter, it may not be that far. As far as cleanliness is concerned, we seem to be socially and psychologically ill equipped to think and act beyond our own body and home.

Finally, there has been a steady governmentalization of garbage. We now take it for granted that garbage collection is a thing of the government. This has two critical implications. One, in so far as the government is highly centralized, there is little interest in the collection of garbage at the local (ward commissioner) level. In fact, the gap between the garbage at the local level and real governmental power at the national level is so wide that the latter hardly sees any garbage being accumulated! And two, since it is a thing of the government, there is hardly any civic response on the issue. There is absolute lack of interest on the part of civic bodies, even NGOs and private entrepreneurs, towards mitigating the problem. Nothing can be tragic than this.

Let me end by posing a question: if the reasons are so entrenched and we are unable to keep just one city clean, how can we expect to keep the whole of Bangladesh clean? Please pause, ponder and pursue.

Garbage: Enhancing the Recycling Paradigm

by Muhammad Ali Tareque

How do we define garbage? Without a serious reflection one will probably say that the portion of our necessary things that we abandon as useless is garbage. Certainly this is a very concise and agreeable definition. The noticeable point here is the uselessness of garbage. This very uselessness of actually turns things into garbage.

I would like to begin by posing the need for reconceptualizing the word garbage. The very word garbage evokes in our mind the idea of filth and dirt. I think, we frequently diminish many positive possibilities of certain situations by preconceptualizing ourselves at it. Trying to define the position of garbage in our life in some other ways may be seen as an imposing act, but I think that it may help us in finding alternatives and thus ascribe it with some benevolent position.

How do we define garbage? Without a serious reflection one will probably say that the portion of our necessary things that we abandon as useless is garbage. Certainly this is a very concise and agreeable definition. The noticeable point here is the uselessness of garbage. This very uselessness of actually turns things into garbage. And we face problem in getting rid of these useless things. In fact it is this very problem that is tagged with the 'garbage' thing. Now if we, in some way, are able to turn these useless things into useful ones, then this garbage would have often rid of its 'problem-atic' attributes. The concept of recycling is already there in vogue. But what I want to say is that, we should not only try to find out the recyclable things but also try to look for this possibility in every kind of garbage and thus try to change our discriminating attitude towards garbage as a whole. If it is done so, we may be able to take holistic steps to resolve this problem with the participation coming from the individual level through the local administration to the national level. I shall go through some of these possibilities.

We may classify the garbage in several groups. My suggestion will be to treat each kind of

garbage differently and take steps for each kind independently.

Biological Garbage

At first comes the biological waste. It is well known that biological garbage can be used to produce compost and biogas. In fact there is a project going on in Mirpur producing compost from biological garbage. That project, starting initially from 100 houses, now is circumscribing as many as 300 houses. It is possible to go for a decentralized structure to collect the biological garbage from each house. By decentralized structure I mean the employment of local administration such as ward commissioner office, as it is actually this office which has the ability to keep rapport with the local persons. We know about the scarcity of natural gas that we are going to face within some decades, as our deposit of natural gas is getting consumed very rapidly. We have to look forward to the future and take steps accordingly. Biogas may be a good substitute for natural gas. It may seem slightly awkward in respect of economical viability for the time being. But as it is inevitable for us to use this in the long run, government can take steps to popularize it by advertising, giving subsidies on it, discouraging the use of natural gas by withdrawing incentives in this sector etc. This will help us averting our dependency on natural gas to biogas, as well as it will help us in handling the biological garbage in more useful way.

Recycled Paper

Next comes the class of garbage that can be used for producing paper, which is more commonly known as recycled paper. The concept of recycled paper is not very novel in other countries. It is in fact a popular

trend to inscribe 'recycled paper' on the products made from this sort. The paper of this sort being a little different from the ordinary ones may be used to make gimmick things like view cards, envelopes, writing pads, sheets of handmade papers, invitation cards etc. It is seen nowadays that, a class is coming out gradually, who are inclined to use this sort of gimmick things. So if enthusiastic companies get incentives from the government they can go for producing this recycled paper and advertise for it. This will also require public consciousness and a decentralized structure to make it a success.

Moldable Things

Then comes the matter of glass. Broken glass pieces may be sold by the households, which in turn may be melted and rescued. In fact this is already being frequently done. But the whole thing is not being done much systematically. Often people throw broken glass in dustbins and small children collect them from stinky dustbins and garbage dumps, which indeed is most unhealthy. The same thing also happens in case of plastics. People often dump them and again small children collect them from stinky and unhealthy bins and dumps. Plastics are frequently used in remodeling and producing different useful plastic products.

A Tentative Setup

For doing the above I will suggest some area-wise body, which may be the office of ward commissioner that will arrange the system for this. The household may be asked to arrange their garbage into some groups as described above. There will be some employees who will periodically collect those garbage from the households and pay them in turn, according to their

weight or some other method, as defined by the authority beforehand. The time-gap of collection may be settled differently for the different groups of garbage. For example, the biological garbage will obviously need a daily collection, whereas the garbage for recycled paper will require an infrequent collection, and the broken glass pieces may require more infrequent collection.

Garbage Sale

Another thing may be taken into consideration. This is garage sale that frequently takes place abroad. It is quite typical of us to refuse to use used things. In fact we are not familiar in such practice and find it humiliating to use secondhand things. It is very pitiful that in spite of being less productive a nation we are not much restrained in consumption. I think it is necessary for us to take up such practice to avoid waste as well as to help in solving garbage problem. This may include fancy things, decoration pieces, books, utensils, electronic devices, video and audio cassettes, furniture, warm clothes etc. To make it popular, some garage-sale programs may be arranged by ward commissioners or enthusiastic organizations of the respective areas.

Many writings have emphasized the need to handle garbage dumping more efficiently, or to reduce the garbage generation and other things. All these are undoubtedly necessary for the enhancement of civic comfort. But as it is inevitable that we have to live with garbage, and as we never can get rid of it completely, it is imperative for us to look at it in practical way and try to convert the problems into some prolific phenomena.

(The author is fellow, Centre for Alternatives)



Accumulating garbage: Where have the cleaners gone?

Down with the Garbage

by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

At present, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) is entrusted with the responsibility of collecting and disposing the wastes. The process involves three stages; collection, transportation and disposal. The common garbage management techniques involve land filling by the waste products at several disposal sites and incineration of the collected waste. The former is more widely used in our city and several disposal sites exist in areas like Matoyal, Jatrabari, Maniknagar etc.

"HELL is a city much like London", wrote Shelly in 19th century. One wonders, what he would have written about our capital even at the last year of this century. The daily traffic jams, ominous law and order situation, regular power failure and serious environmental pollution are indeed giving us the taste of hell. Obviously the traditional ways of handling the problems is not working and yet we are failing to look beyond traditionalism.

One of the delicate and rather 'funky' issues where problem is taking an awful shape day by day is the absence of proper concern and mechanism for disposing daily garbage and waste. According to a rough estimate, about 3500-4000 tons of solid waste is produced in the city each day and the Dhaka City Corporation removes about 42% of such waste. The rest is left to worsen the living condition of the city dwellers. The ever-growing accumulation of garbage is causing serious environmental pollution and severe health hazard in this densely populated city.

With the question of how to design or improve the mechanism regarding garbage management I went to the general people and some concerned officials and experts. Some innovative alternative ideas were located.

The Existing Garbage Management Mechanism

At present, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) is entrusted with the responsibility of collecting and disposing the wastes. The process involves three stages: collection, transportation and disposal. The common garbage management techniques involve land filling by the waste products at several disposal sites and incineration of the collected waste. The former is more widely used in our city and several disposal sites exist in areas like Matoyal, Jatrabari, Maniknagar etc. Also a garbage treatment plant of the DCC is operating near the Pagla area. The basic idea is that people will throw their daily wastes in specific dustbins (in recent days mountable containers are used in most of the areas) and the DCC trucks will collect and dispose them. According to an estimate, it costs about Tk.810-820 for the DCC to collect and dispose every one ton of garbage.

Surprisingly, the method of recycling the city garbage is yet to be formalized. According to a study by A.H.Md. Maqsood Sinha, General Secretary of the Waste Concern in Dhaka, 15% recyclable wastes are collected from the total generated wastes by more than 87,000 thousand people from the informal sector. The inorganic portions of the waste in the residential as well as commercial areas of Dhaka City are recycled by the tokais. But the larger organic portion of the waste - about 82% of the total is not recycled at all.

Problems with the Waste Management System: The general people as well as the experts in this field have identified several noticeable problems regarding the current approach and techniques of garbage removal/disposal. Firstly, several families living in the residential areas like Banani, Siddeshwari and Basabo mentioned that garbage removal is often irregular and sometimes garbage remain put up for even a week. The sufferings of the people are easily imaginable. While some of the respondents blamed the inefficiency of the DCC, while

others pointed out that given the size of the population and area of the city, it is pretty difficult for one organization to tackle the 4000 metric tons of garbage produced each day. Secondly both the general people and some of the persons concerned with garbage management were critical about the whole process of land filling by waste products. Dr. Asrafuddin Ahmed, the Chief Medical Officer of the DCC mentioned that this environmentally hazardous process of unsanitary land filling has been discarded in most parts of the world. A.H.Md. Maqsood Sinha, stated that the pollution due to garbage dumping around the disposal sites make habitation difficult and rents of the houses constructed upon the land formed by garbage filling are usually low. The emission of stinky methane gas in such land areas continues to disrupt normal living condition for years. Musa Ahmed (27) of the Basabo area fiercely complained that due to the huge pile of garbage stocked at a near by site they always have to keep their windows closed which makes life difficult during hot summer days. Another family of the Mughla area pointed out that they are planning to find a new house in a better locality as regular power failure and the intolerable smell of garbage is turning the area simply uninhabitable. Similar criticisms have been made regarding the method of incineration. Maqsood Sinha pointed out that unlike the developed countries, most of our waste is organic in nature. Such wastes are not easily extinguishable and thus its burning requires large amount of fuel. Also the process invariably involves environmental pollution. Thirdly, the cost that the DCC pay for garbage per ton is quite high and application of more innovative methods like garbage recycling can easily reduce the expenditure.

In general most of the respondents agreed that the current system of garbage management needs to be rethought specially as the amount may multiply in the next century given the growth of population and expansion of the city.

Planning the Dustbins

Most of the dustbins of the Dhaka City have not been set up in an organized and planned way. In some areas the spot where the local people used to throw their daily wastes were turned into sites for dustbin. In fact, the dustbins are not in accordance with the number of inhabitants in an area, the nature of the locality (whether residential or commercial), the arrangement and distribution of the households and so on. Thus, often the dustbins are either too near to a private house or they are too far. Also the size and number of dustbins are not of ten adequate for the total garbage produced in an area. Some of the respondents felt that there should be a comprehensive study to assess the location, number and size of dustbins for different localities. Based on such assessment, dustbins should be rearranged in accordance with the needs of different localities and the present distribution of households and commercial buildings with a keen attention on what shape these might take in next 20-30 years.

Another important point that many of the respondents raised was about the effectiveness of the mountable containers that are recently used in dustbin sites. Both Asrafuddin Ahmed of the DCC and

Maqsood Sinha of Waste Concern identified such containers as purely useless in our country context. Asrafuddin Ahmed pointed out that first of all these containers are small in size and thus can't hold the total amount of garbage thrown. A large portion of the waste thus is scattered around the containers to make the things even worse. Secondly, the trucks of the DCC can carry only one container at a time and thus have to come twice or thrice to the same site to remove the entire garbage. This increases the transportation cost. On the other hand these containers can't be washed properly due to their shape. Therefore often the wastes that are stuck inside can not be removed easily. Some citizens also complained that these containers often provide a cover for those who are inclined to use the dustbin sites for toilet purposes. One thing that came out strongly from the general people is that the government should rethink the appropriateness of such containers.

Recycling the Garbage

One major point where the general people and experts unanimously agreed was that recycling the collected garbage is the most cost-effective and environmentally friendly method for the ultimate disposal of the garbage. Recycling plants should be immediately set up with proper technical and resource backup and both the government and the NGOs should be involved in such venture. Moreover the recycling of the inorganic wastes by the informal sectors should be given institutional shapes which also provide employment for a large number of tokais.

Decentralized Garbage Management

Another very important idea shared by many of the interviewees was that it is very much difficult for one DCC to manage the huge amount of garbage produced by this city, growing in size and population. The burden needs to be shared by others as well. However the interviewees had different ideas about the actors that can play a part in this respect or methods that can be employed to decentralize the garbage management system.

Involving the Local Communities

One of the suggestions is that the local communities can play a substantial role in collecting and moving the garbage. In fact, I found in the Uttara area that the local welfare associations have a system of collecting daily garbage from the households in return for a small monthly amount. This type of arrangement should be encouraged in other areas. Moreover involving the local Ward Commissioners can broaden the scope of such arrangements. As the elected representative of community, the Ward Commissioners can use the government resources to dispose the wastes locally while the responsibility of collection can be taken up by the local clubs and/or associations. Such notion definitely necessitates more authority and resources for the Ward Commissioners and also the local associations. The government can come up with creative incentives like declaring a yearly prize for the locality that has been the most successful in terms of keeping the surroundings clean. In this manner at least the problems regarding unremoved garbage can be reduced to some extent. But problems are likely to remain regarding the ultimate management of the collected

garbage. Some concerned persons mentioned in this context about the utility of community level recycling of the collected wastes. The idea mainly implies setting up of recycling plants for the organic wastes in various localities by the government and/or NGOs. Local associations and Ward Commissioners can be involved actively with such plants and the profits from selling compost that can be produced by recycling can be shared. Maqsood Sinha is already working on designing such a framework for the slum areas.

NGO Management: Some respondents also suggested about handing over the garbage management sector along with some other city issues like management of public toilets to the NGOs.

Private Voluntary Organizations: Asrafuddin Ahmed of the DCC suggested the need for developing private voluntary organizations for garbage management in various localities and according to him, 'here voluntary should not mean totally without payment. Good incentives always means good management.'

The Question of Industrial and Clinical Wastes

Industrial and clinical wastes have more dangerous implications for the environment of the city and health of the people. Though there is a provision that the industrial plants would recycle their waste products, it is seldom carried out. Polluting affect of the wastes of the Hazaribag Tannery is well known. But the government is yet to take any substantial measure to tackle this issue. Many interviewees suggested that stricter imposition of legal rules upon the industries for not recycling their poisonous wastes is the only solution to the matter. Moreover the civil society can also play an important role by individually or collectively suing such industries, writing about the issue in the newspapers and magazines and carrying out extensive research on the matter. In this context the role played by the Bangladesh Environment Lawyers Association (BELA) is indeed appreciable.

No less harmful are the wastes disposed from the hospitals in dustbins. Though only about 0.5%-1% of the total wastes produced are clinical they can rapidly spread harmful diseases among the communities. Moreover as these wastes pollutes the other types of wastes, recycling becomes difficult and dangerous specially for the tokais involved in the recycling of the inorganic wastes. To tackle the problem some suggested about making separate arrangements by the DCC for the daily collection and disposal of wastes from the hospitals and clinics of the city.

Addressing the 'Garbage Norms' in the School Curricula

To develop long term social network against our practices that are complicating the garbage problem, the civic norms regarding garbage production and disposal should be a part of the education from early periods of school. If a child compulsorily learns not to throw waste products here and there, he/she develops a concern that garbage is a serious threat to the environment and health and can substantially influence the families in these regards. Thus the education planners must consider addressing the civic norms re-

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